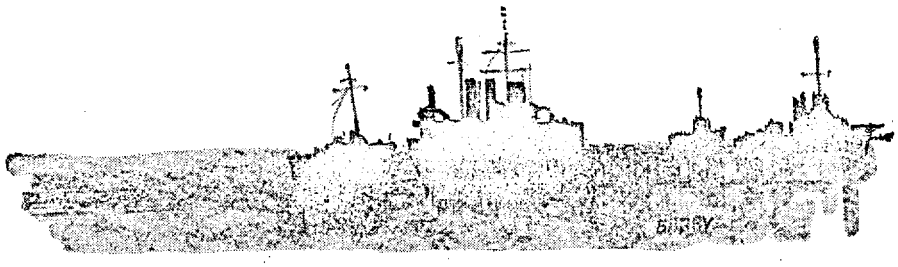


Soviet Aid to Vietnam

ALBERT PARRY

LAST SUMMER, Ivan Shchedrov of *Pravda* accompanied a Vietcong unit as it made its way through the South Vietnamese jungle some thirty-five miles northwest of Saigon. He wrote in *Pravda* about his experiences, though without revealing many vital facts. More recently, two Soviet motion-picture cameramen, Oleg Artseulov and Vladimir Komarov, have returned from South Vietnam, where for weeks they lived and traveled with the guerrillas of the Mekong Delta's swamps and rice paddies. In September, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* ran four long articles on Artseulov's adventures. In late October and early November, Komarov wrote of his South Vietnam impressions in *Izvestia*. Judging from the sixteen accompanying photos in both papers, all interesting and some even forceful despite their murky reproduction, the two Russians brought back a notable pictorial haul.

It is from reports like these that we get an impression of the growing Russian presence in Vietnam. The picture can be filled out by bits and pieces of information, some casual and scattered yet significant, in the Soviet and other East European press; the monitored texts of the surprisingly frequent broadcasts on the subject emanating from sundry East European radio stations; and the reports on the topic reaching us from a wide range of non-Communist diplomats, soldiers, seamen, newsmen, travelers, and other observers in Southeast Asia. And one thing is clear: the Russians are stepping up their aid to Vietnam.

A problem for the Soviet Union is the sheer logistic one of getting aid and supplies into the country. Increasingly it is sending them via the 7,500-mile sea lanes from Eastern Europe instead of relying on dubious Chinese co-operation in allowing men and matériel to proceed overland.

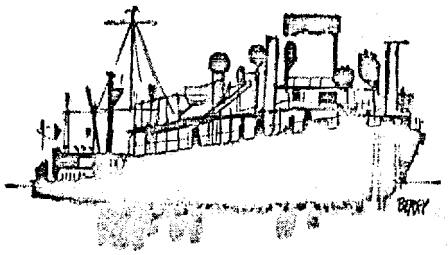
Until recently, while the bulk of Soviet aid still arrived by rail and truck via China, each American raid on the Vietnamese roads leading south from the Chinese border gave Peking one more excuse to halt or slow down the Soviet shipments, then to blame the Soviets for the sluggish trickle. Chief among Peking's aims was to force Moscow to increase its seaborne aid and thus cause an American blockade of the Soviet sea traffic as well as American raids on the port of Haiphong. Such a development, the Chinese hoped, would lead to a break between Moscow and Washington.

In spite of some angry insistence in Congress and elsewhere in America, there is no blockade so far. But we did start bombing the outskirts of Haiphong and our shell and shot have fallen close to the Soviet ships; a few Soviet seamen have been wounded or injured. Also, American naval units insistently follow and query, by semaphore, Communist vessels en route to Vietnam. On a single day last September the Bulgarian ship *Stara Planina* bound for Haiphong counted a total of twenty-five American plane and helicopter passes over her decks.

Nevertheless, despite a few angry notes of diplomatic protest, the Russians are relieved that the United States has not resorted to anything like the stringent sea-and-air measures of the 1962 Cuba crisis, and they continue to send increasing supplies to North Vietnam by sea.

It is not so generally known that the Chinese, too, are in this sea commerce with North Vietnam. In mid-August of 1966, word from Hong Kong indicated that the so-called socialist traffic coming into Haiphong consisted in an average month of ten to fifteen Red Chinese ships in addition to six to eight Soviet vessels and five from other Eastern European nations, each ship bringing from six to ten thousand tons of cargo. The Soviet government, however, claims a larger share of this sea traffic to Haiphong. Last August, it declared that more than half of all the ships then entering Haiphong were of Soviet registry.

"ODESSA-MAMMA," as the Russians fondly call the port, is the foremost source of all this traffic. An English-language broadcast from Moscow to southern Asia on December 23, 1965, exulted: "Odessa is the biggest port on the Black Sea. Its busiest route is the one leading to Haiphong. A constant caravan of big merchant ships is plying this lane." Vasily Merinianin, the Soviet official in charge of the Black Sea



traffic, was then introduced by the broadcaster and said: "Soviet seamen regard it as their solemn duty to load and deliver goods to Vietnam as quickly as possible. They understand perfectly well that the arrival in Haiphong of every Soviet cargo ship helps the Vietnamese in their struggle against the American aggressors."

At the empire's eastern end, Vladivostok plays a role, too. The local stevedores' morale is kept up by frequent rallies. At one of these, an unusual tape of a U.S. air raid on the North Vietnamese port of Hon Gai was played. Recorded by the sailors of the Soviet ship *Vaykhan,* it enthralled the audience with the shrieks of the American jets, the explosions of the bombs, and the chorus of sirens of the ships at anchor off the port. Thus, said Radio Moscow speaking in Vietnamese to Vietnam last June 23, did the Soviet sailors "unmask U.S. crimes for the working people of Vladivostok."

Official Soviet statements praise Soviet sailors for helping North Vietnam's longshoremen unload their ships in record time. We may surmise, however, that part of the seamen's eagerness to help stems from a desire to cut short their own dangerous stay in North Vietnam's ports. Unofficial accounts from Soviet ports tend to confirm this. Not only reasons of security but also of the seamen's morale seem to be involved in the practice whereby some Soviet ships are announced as sailing for Latin-American destinations—until they reach the Mediterranean, where the crews are told that the course has been changed from Havana to Haiphong.

Sino-Gamesmanship

The overland route across China is by no means abandoned, even if it no longer carries as much of the Soviet aid as before. The history of the dispute over Soviet arms has been colorful.

Early in 1965, Hanoi urgently asked Moscow to help with anti-aircraft defenses. Ho Chi Minh wanted not only guns but also rockets, those famous SAMS or surface-to-air missiles. In February of that year the Russians agreed to send the first important shipments of weapons and groups of technicians, on condition that China clear their passage. China demanded the right of inspection. The Russians agreed but began to complain that China took its time about the job. China countered that it was sending the Soviet military loads and personnel across its soil with all possible dispatch but that the Russian matériel sent to Vietnam was either obsolete or so damaged that it was useless. The Soviets were accused of using this aid to Vietnam as a handy chance to clear damaged matériel from their warehouses. Moscow retorted that the Chinese often removed for themselves the best of the Soviet arms destined for Hanoi.

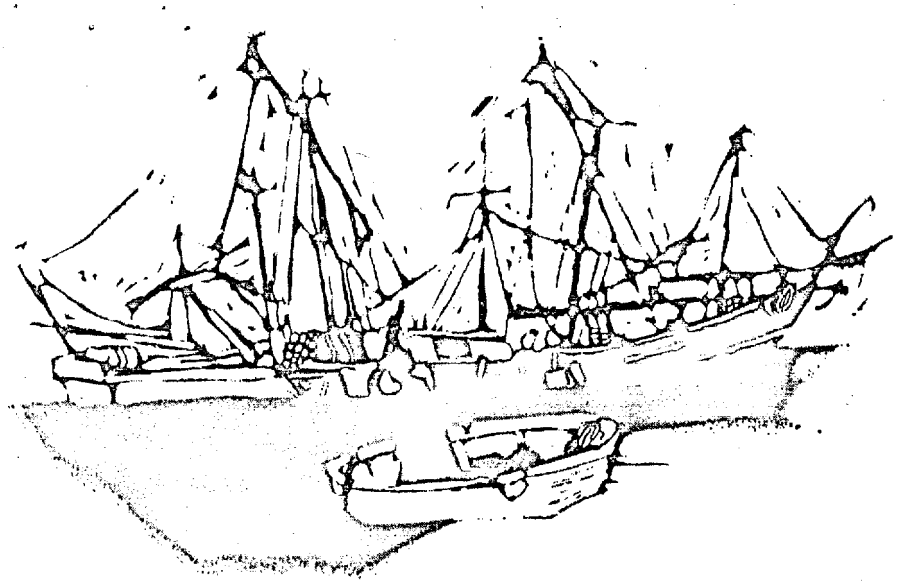
A contact in Washington tells me that much of the delay in Soviet shipments was due to the Chinese practice of copying (rather than keeping) certain pieces of Russian equipment. "In some cases the Soviet equipment was indeed damaged," he said, "but it was damaged by the Chinese experts, who weren't too expert. They didn't know how to reassemble the Soviet matériel after taking it apart for copying."

In March, 1966, in reply to Chinese charges that the Soviet help to Hanoi was all too scant, the Moscow leaders sent a confidential letter to all fraternal Communist parties. Carefully leaked out to the world at large via the East German Communists (who sent copies to their connections in Bonn), the letter stressed that in 1965 North Vietnam received from the Soviet Union arms and military equipment worth half a billion rubles ($555 million). The list included rocket installations and conventional anti-aircraft guns, MIGS and other planes, and tanks, coastal artillery, and small warships.

On April 21, 1966, Marshal Rodion Y. Malinovsky, the Soviet Defense Minister, delivered a public speech while on a visit to Budapest in which he again accused Communist China of seriously obstructing Soviet aid on its overland route to North Vietnam. In an indignant rejoinder of May 3, Peking's Foreign Ministry claimed that from February, 1965, when the Vietnam conflict was first seriously stepped up, to the end of that year, the Soviet Union shipped to Hanoi across China a total of forty-three thousand tons of war matériel—a pittance, in Peking's scornful opinion. Peking insisted that it was helping, not hindering, Russian aid. Furthermore, the Chinese claimed that in one period they provided 1,780 Chinese freight cars, of which the Russians used only 556.

THE TRUTH seems to be that the Chinese railroads and truck roads are generally inadequate to the sudden burden of Soviet shipments. The freight cars are poorly ballasted, the trains are small and slow. Furthermore, the changes from the broad Russian and Outer Mongolian gauge of five feet to China's four feet eight and a half inches and then to North Vietnam's even narrower roadbed involve a lot of lifting and shifting of the car bodies.

Nevertheless, the Chinese have made an attempt to cope with the problems: it is the well-disciplined and hard-working railroad troops they sent to Ho Chi Minh who keep the Vietnamese part of the supply route going in the face of the U.S. raids. These are reg-



ular soldier-builders, in uniform, organized in divisions but not armed. They repair tracks and bridges and build alternative routes. Some have been reported to be laying out small airstrips near the border. A very few man the anti-aircraft batteries guarding North Vietnam's main transport centers, but usually this task is a jealously guarded prerogative of the Vietnamese. Last July officials in Washington estimated the number of such Chinese roadbuilders at thirty to forty thousand, but in August the guess went up to fifty thousand and in December to a hundred thousand (while the native Vietnamese busy on road work number a quarter million).

THERE IS of course a third way of sending help to Hanoi: by air. But this would mean flying Soviet cargo planes over China, and Peking does not like this at all. It insists on clearing each plane separately, rather than issuing a wholesale permit for overflight. And so the sea is more and more the answer. U.S. reconnaissance planes flying over Haiphong have photographed more and more supplies being unloaded from Soviet ships—not only peaceful machinery but also missiles and launching equipment as well as conventional anti-aircraft guns.

Since the fall of 1965, the number of conventional anti-aircraft guns in North Vietnam has risen from fifteen hundred to at least five thousand; one unofficial estimate in Washington puts the figure at seven thousand. In the fall of 1965 there were only four North Vietnamese batteries firing SAMS. By early October, 1966, this number had risen to twenty-five or thirty, each with six launchers. There were then some 130 sites from which the batteries could operate; twenty per cent were occupied and active at any given time.

An interesting domestic radiobroadcast in Czech, devoted in part to the military problems in Vietnam, was monitored in the West as it came out of Prague last July 29. Czech officers were asked questions that showed dissatisfaction on the part of local Communists with the SAM performance in Vietnam. One question was: "Is there no more effective anti-aircraft defense in existence that would prevent U.S. aircraft from bombing North Vietnam, and have the socialist states [meaning Czechoslovakia, of course] such means?"

In reply, Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Novak of the Czech Military Academy reassured the listeners that, naturally, Czech radar and missile defenses were better. "This is because," he explained, "our defense is handled by men who have had years of training and also because we have a perfect ground warning system of long standing. This does not exist in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." He went on: "I would not say that the number of American planes brought down is low. Several dozen have been shot down. Many more have been shot down by artillery and some by aircraft. The reason is that rockets demand years of experience and training. Incidentally, it is wrong to assume that the introduction of missiles means the end of anti-aircraft artillery. Missiles are too expensive and costly to be used against just any aircraft. They are used against aircraft that are carrying particularly dangerous bombs or attacking very important targets. For this reason it cannot be expected even in the future that this would change substantially—that missiles would become the sole defense against air raids. They are rather the exception. . . ."

Thus, via Prague, we garner one more hint that the Russians do not want to escalate the Vietnam war if they can help it—and surely not by sending in a substantially greater number of SAMS than they already have there, nor by training far larger numbers of North Vietnamese officers and soldiers to operate those computers and launchers.

Long-Range Training Plans

It is believed in Washington that some of the Soviet military assigned to SAM sites in North Vietnam may have been wounded or even killed, since they serve beside their native pupils in combat conditions. The Soviet experts train their students in or near Hanoi, then go with them to the actual battle stations to see how they do under fire. More coaching follows on the spot, so it is almost inevitable that the Soviet officers and soldiers actually man the radar screens and the missile-launching devices, at least in the initial stages of instruction.

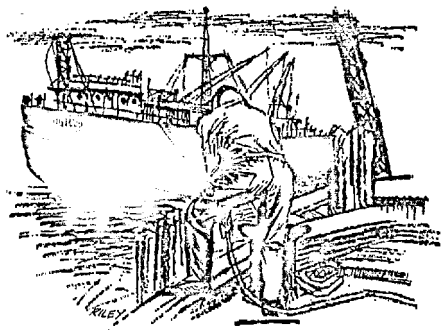
According to *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the Soviet rocket men's working day in Vietnam officially lasts thirteen hours; unofficially, far longer. The extra time is devoted to "individual consultations" between the Soviet teachers and their charges. The trouble at first was that some of the young Vietnamese soldiers turned out to be deficient not only in technical knowledge needed for radar operation and missile firing but also in "general education," as the Russians gently put it. And so the spare hours were used to teach the Vietnamese their mathematics, chemistry, and elements of "electrotechnology." The group had native Vietnamese on the staff who spoke Russian, but many of the

East Germany, and a hundred East German doctors are reported to be serving in North Vietnam. In addition to the eight hundred Russians reportedly already present in North Vietnam on air-defense missions, some East German officers and men are rumored to be employed in North Vietnam's missile training. In goods and capital aid not directly of the war-matériel kind, Ulbricht's government is thought to have delivered to Ho Chi Minh from June, 1965, to October, 1966, a total of $4 million worth (calculated at the official East German rate of four marks to the dollar). Besides, regular commerce between East Germany and North Vietnam amounts to over a million dollars a year, consisting mostly of industrial wares going to North Vietnam and some food and consumer goods being sent to East Germany.

But the bloc's largest economic aid to and trade with Hanoi is of course extended by the Soviet Union. Gathered at a summit meeting in Moscow in mid-October, 1966, the Soviet Union and its eight allies agreed to give about $1 billion worth of additional help to Hanoi in matériel and money, of which $800 million is to come from the U.S.S.R. The others' contributions are typified by the Polish pledge of $30 million.

INGENIOUS Soviet deals to help North Vietnam began in the middle 1950's, right after the Geneva division of the country, with the celebrated "triangular" deal wherein Burma, to pay for Russian cement, delivered 150,000 tons of rice to Haiphong, thus (in Bernard Fall's opinion) saving North Vietnam from starvation. The first Soviet engineer came to the Haiphong cement plant in September, 1955; and it was he who showed the natives how to dig up the machines buried by the retreating French. In November of that year the first cement was produced, and by 1958 the output was twice as high as in the French era. In the summer of 1966, despite the American bombing raids, the Soviets claimed that production was three times as great.

Although precise figures are difficult to obtain, it is estimated that in the ten years through 1964, Soviet economic aid to North Vietnam totaled some $350 million. It faltered somewhat in 1963 and 1964 when Khrushchev apparently was resigned to seeing the country in China's orbit (in 1955-1964, China's economic aid to North Vietnam amounted to about $450 million). But Khrushchev's successors have revived the Soviet interest in Ho Chi Minh. Moscow's exports to North Vietnam rose from $47.6 million in 1964 to more than $74.8 million in 1965—



this of course in addition to some $555 million worth of arms sent in 1965 alone. The figures for 1966 promise to be still higher.

In its German-language broadcast to Germany on June 21, 1965, Radio Moscow declared that of the funds that North Vietnam was then getting from socialist countries (including China), nearly half came from the Soviet Union. A third of this Soviet aid, the broadcast said, was given free of charge. Some fifty industrial enterprises had by then been built or rebuilt with Soviet technical aid. Such Soviet-assisted plants produced all of North Vietnam's apatite and superphosphates, about ninety per cent of its coal, and more than half of its machine tools. The country's power, mining, engineering, and technical industries were all helped or run by the Russian donors and advisers.

From other Soviet sources we learn that the economic division of the Soviet embassy in Hanoi is in charge of all this aid. Vladimir Lokteshov, an economist staff member, supervises Soviet engineers and other experts who serve in the expansion of the Haiphong port, at the Hanoi machine-tool works, in the construction of a large refrigerating plant, at an electrical-supply factory, and at the coffee and tea plantations. It is claimed that the machine-tool plant, covering fourteen acres, is entirely fitted out with Soviet equipment. Alekscı Goncharov, another staff member in the embassy's economic division, is in charge of other Soviet engineering crews busy in North Vietnam's mines, geological exploration for more minerals and metals, and projects aimed at the expansion of certain of the country's large industrial enterprises. Their work is dangerous. In one place, nearly a hundred Soviet miners had to seek shelter from American raids. At another mine, near Uong Bi, one of the thirty-four Soviet miners was slightly wounded during a U.S. attack in 1965.

Forty Soviet engineers and technicians are aiding in the erection of a hydroelectric plant at Tkhak Ba. Albert Belikov, one of these men, returning to Moscow on a leave, said to a Soviet interviewer recently: "In the last year of my work in Vietnam I lived through several bombing raids. Many of my Vietnamese friends died under the American bombs. The howl of falling bombs caught up with me several times." In keeping with the official line (but perhaps not without some factual basis to it), Belikov said that relations between the Soviet experts and the Vietnamese workers were of the best. "When the sky is calm, we play soccer and volleyball together, we sing songs together."

A Delicate Balance

Whatever facts and figures the Russians officially reveal about their aid to North Vietnam are being made public not in order to taunt the United States but to impress Peking —and even more to refute to the rest of the Communist world the Chinese charges that Moscow is not helping Hanoi enough.

Wherever possible, Moscow cites high-minded generalities rather than hard details. And this not only for reasons of security but also, most definitely, so as not to anger the Americans too much.

Yet Moscow is not equivocal about its part in the conflict, even if it allots the quantities of arms it sends extremely gingerly. Obviously the Soviet Union wants neither the United States nor China to win. Still it wants no Third World War to